



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

6th Sunday of Easter | Year C



Josef Ignaz Mildorfer; 1750's
Previously on an altar in the Church of Holy Spirit in Sopron, Hungary
Now in Hungarian National Gallery



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer

God of mercy,

You wash away our sins in water,

You give us new birth in the Spirit,

And redeem us in the blood of Christ.

As we celebrate Christ's resurrection

Increase our awareness of these blessings,

And renew your gift of life within us.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,

Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

One God forever and ever.

[Second Sunday of Easter, Morning Prayer, Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours, ICEL, Catholic Book, New York, 452]

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The entire Easter season is a remembrance made present of Christ's Paschal Mystery—the life, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of Christ's Spirit to the world. An entire season is set aside for this reflection. Today's liturgy reminds us of the eternal prize that awaits us—the new heaven and the new earth—promised by Scripture.
- ▶ Today's liturgy also turns our focus toward the manifestation of Christ's Holy Spirit so present to us in the liturgy. The liturgy is for us today participation in that first Pentecost experienced by the earliest Christian community. The Spirit is the driving force and change agent in every liturgical celebration. Through the epicletic [invoking] action of the Holy Spirit, bread is changed into Christ's Body, wine is changed into his Blood and we are changed into Christ's mystical Body.
- ▶ The Spirit is the generative life force of the Triune God. The Spirit hovered over the waters of creation. The Spirit is present in the waters of death and resurrection and the oil and seal of confirmation. The Spirit sanctifies the ordained and husbands and wives in the sacrament of marriage. The Spirit sacramentally reconciles us to God and sin is wiped clean. The Spirit heals our ills and provides spiritual sustenance for the journey through the final portal of life. The Spirit creates the liturgy, without which there would be no liturgy.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading 1: Acts of the Apostles 15: 1-2; 22-29

- ▶ A theology emerges from today's reading. Salvation is freely offered; it cannot be earned; it is an unmerited gift from God offered to all people inclusively.
- ▶ The apostles gather for one last time as the Holy Spirit takes center stage. They convene a council to work out emerging controversies between Jewish Christian and Gentile Christians.
- ▶ Readers are given a front row seat as they watch the Spirit guide and lead the fledgling church. Peter recedes in the background from this point forward and Paul forges ahead as the primary actor.
- ▶ Some Jewish Christians [Judaizers] believed that the Jewish way of life—the Mosaic Law-- was an absolutely requisite for Christian discipleship. In other words, Gentile converts to Christianity should be circumcised if they desired salvation. They were judging the new converts according to what gave them life—their adherence to the Law of Moses out of sincere love of God.
- ▶ Their judgment, however, caused problems for the Christian community.
- ▶ Paul and Barnabus were sent as advocates for the Gentile position.
- ▶ Jews feared that their much-treasured Jewish traditions would be at risk due to

the growing numbers of Gentile Christians. .

- ▶ The leaders of the Jerusalem council worked feverishly to find a solution amenable to both sides. The council acknowledged God's salvific work with Gentiles. Paul gave witness to the way in which he was still guided by the Mosaic Law and the way in which Gentile conversion and faith was flourishing. All parties reached a unifying, charitable decision.
- ▶ The council illustrated the way in which true collaboration in the Christian community should function.
- ▶ The decision of the council affirmed that circumcision for Gentiles was not required. Gentiles were, however, asked to respect purity laws (such as refraining from eating left over meat used in Temple worship and subsequently sold in the marketplace—equating such meat with idolatry) so as not to offend Jewish Christians. “Charity will sometimes demand not compromises but a willingness to restrict one's freedom when its use, even if legitimate, might scandalize the weak”¹.
- ▶ The work of the council was evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the church when it gathers in a spirit of mutuality, charity and understanding.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ What does Paul have to teach us about collaboration not just in the Church but also in the world?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about collaboration?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about one's treasured positions?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about the value of unity in the Christian community? Why is it an important value?

Second Reading: Revelation 21: 10-14; 22-23

- ▶ Today's reading focuses on the heavenly city as the future reality.
- ▶ We hear of the Twelve Tribes—an allusion to the gathering of all God's people—the Church.
- ▶ The Church founded by the Apostles, flowing from God's history with the people

¹*Days of the Lord* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 194.

of Israel, journeys through the generations to that new and future heaven and earth.

- ▶ Reference to the temple was a sign of God's past relationship with his people. Absence of temple in this exhortation is a reminder that God no longer will use the temple as intermediary, but will intimately encounter those he loves.
- ▶ The work begun in this New Jerusalem through the foundation laid by the apostles and early followers of Christ will continue into eternity.
- ▶ We live in the kingdom "now" as we await the kingdom "yet to come." We feast at the earthly banquet in concert with the saints in heaven as we await the final banquet.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What does the image of the new heaven and new earth mean to you?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that we are living in the kingdom now and not yet? In what way have you observed this kingdom—this present reality—as the kingdom of God?
- ▶ What are the implications that we no longer need the temple as intermediary between God and us—that God deals with us face to face? Have you ever had the experience of God dealing with you face to face?
- ▶ Where is the good news?

Gospel: John 14:23-29

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Today's Gospel relates Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples. Jesus consoles them over his pending death and promises to send his Spirit to be with him in his absence.
- ▶ Jesus allows his disciples to experience the relationship he has with his Father—the intimate union both share. Jesus insists that they too will enjoy that same union

through the power of the Holy Spirit.

- ▶ The Spirit will be the guiding force of the fledging Church and the Church of all ages. The Spirit causes change wherever the Spirit is active and operative.
- ▶ Jesus invites his disciples to see beyond the present suffering of Jesus' death to the glory that awaits.
- ▶ The Spirit will strengthen disciples to endure whatever befalls them until the day of their union with Christ in heaven.
- ▶ When God created the heaven and the earth God created all things in perfect harmony—the shalom peace of Eden. God's intention for the world was peace and harmony. Then sin entered the world and disrupted the peace intended by God for all creation.
- ▶ Jesus restored the peace of Eden when he established the reign of God in his earthly ministry. Whenever two or more are gathered in his name, the shalom of Eden is present.
- ▶ The greeting of peace was understood to mean that the person to whom peace was offered was in committed, covenant relationship with God.
- ▶ John the evangelist sees no distinction between Jesus and the Paraclete he will send. They are one and the same.
- ▶ Theology of the Spirit emerged out of the Johannine community as a result of the bewilderment of the community over the fact that Jesus' return was not as immediate as they believed it would be. The first witnesses to the Jesus event were dead and could not strengthen belief in things seen and experienced.
- ▶ The Paraclete answered their bewilderment.
- ▶ Jesus may not return today or tomorrow, but in his absence his Spirit was alive and active in the community.
- ▶ John's community was living in the reality of the reign of God now and yet to come (realized eschatology). They patiently awaited their union with God in the next life as they lived in the reign of God Christ established in this life--the reign he entrusted to the care of his abiding Spirit.
- ▶ John's community reminds us today that we are to live and promote the reign of God in this world with our eye and vision always looking forward to our life in the next world.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is your vision of the intended peace of Eden? What does “all creation living in perfect harmony” mean to you? What would such a world be like?
- ▶ Imagine for a moment that you are one of the disciples and Jesus is trying to tell you that he will be leaving you, that he will die a horrible death and that you are not to fear because he will send a piece of himself to be with you and walk with you in his absence. How would you respond? How would you feel? What would you want to do? What would it take for you to believe in the power of this unseen Spirit?
- ▶ Have you ever had the experience of trusting and yielding to the power of Jesus’ Spirit in your life? Have you ever been aware that The Holy Spirit is active in your life?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. We are living in a very fractious time. Good Christian people even find themselves on different sides of various treasured positions—left, right and middle. Each side believes their position is the only position. Each group believes God ordains their position. There is no dialogue and all sides demonize the other.

I was once judged a “radical feminist” because I was doing my job of preparing ministers for their roles in the liturgy. I was accused of usurping the role of the priest. The person who accused me believed he was righteous in his judgment.

A few years later a man approached me to apologize for his hatred of me. He told me that the person who accused me of being a radical feminist had told him he should avoid contact with me because I was one of those terrible “radicals”. The man who approached me assured me that after getting to know me he learned that the accusations were false.

Paul and Peter present us with a model for dealing with conflict—open, honest, charitable airing of grievances and controversies and accommodation that is respectful of all parties involved. Today’s Christian communities have much to learn from our ancestors in the faith.

#2. God does deal with us face to face. We are able to approach God and do not need the Temple as the intermediary. Every time my family has reached the precipice of tragedy, misfortune, or sorrow—God shows his face. God may not appear in the flesh, but he makes his presence known. Such as the night we were on the verge of losing our second grandchild to miscarriage. Life circumstances were crumbling around us. I found myself huddled in a corner of the church—sullen, sorrowful and disconsolate. “Where are you God?” is the only mantra I could mutter. As I sat there drowning in doubt and fear a woman came up behind me and simply placed her hand on my shoulder. Not a word was spoken, but presence was felt. I heard that small still voice, “You wonder where I am? I am sitting right beside you in the compassionate hand of one of my disciples.” In that brief encounter I knew God stood face to face with me and was walking with us. We did not lose that second baby. Today Patrick is our beautiful seven-year-old grandson!

3. The “Peace and Harmony of Eden” is **the** priceless pearl of kingdom living. The world promises discord, division, wars and rumors of war. History has never been void of such things. Yet through eyes of faith when we gather in Jesus’ name and do what he commanded, the original intention of the shalom of Eden is at our fingertips.

One would like to think that Christian communities are immune from such discord, but they are not. The original shalom (peace) of Eden can be restored through the reconciling power of Christ and our humble yielding to it.

Many years ago our community was embroiled in serious controversy. Discord abounded. Christian charity was lacking on both sides of the divide. The very wise pastor gathered people from both sides of the controversy together and in an open display of humble reconciliation invited the small gathered community to enter into the peace of Eden—to allow God to heal and reconcile all that divided us.

It was not a peace easily won, but peace did return; harmony was eventually restored. Without the humble acknowledgement that we are children of God, created in his image and called into communion with him and one another such reconciliation would never have been possible.

God's original intention for the world—the Peace of Eden is not only possible, it can be realized when God's people submit to the healing, reconciling power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in the life of the community.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Holy Spirit
Sacraments
Sacrament of Baptism
Salvation

Church
Revelation I or II
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus reminds his disciples that he will send the Paraclete in his absence. His Spirit will guide and strengthen the disciples and the Christian community after Jesus' death. Thus, today, the doctrinal focus will be the Holy Spirit.

SACRAMENTS

The Paschal Mystery is made manifest in the Easter season. The Holy Spirit is manifest in all the sacraments of the Church. It is the Spirit that causes the sacramental change in every element of every sacrament. Jesus promises to send his Holy Spirit to be with the Church in his absence. That presence continues in the sacraments. Thus, today the doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal issue of SACRAMENTS.

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

We are saved by God's love [Gospel] and we are saved by God's presence to us through the joys and the sorrows of our lives. The vehicle for that saving grace is Baptism. Easter season is a good time to reflect on the Holy Spirit who has been given to us in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, the sacraments of initiation—the sacraments that make present the paschal mystery of Christ. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to be with the Church in his absence. That presence is manifest to us most particularly in the sacraments of initiation. Thus today we will focus our attention on BAPTISM.

SALVATION

Easter is a time we meditate upon the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation accomplished through the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Jesus' leaves us his ongoing plan of salvation when he tells his disciples that he will send the Paraclete to be with us in his absence. The first reading also focuses on god's plan of salvation. Thus, today we will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE

The Paschal Mystery is made manifest in the Easter season. Easter is an appropriate time to reflect on the mystery of Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit to which we are given access in the liturgy. We experience the paschal mystery of Christ in the Eucharistic liturgy in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the Eucharistic cup. Thus today's doctrinal session will focus on the **SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE**—the symbols of the Eucharist.

CHURCH

Jesus tells us he will send the Paraclete to be with the Church in his absence. Throughout the Easter season the Acts of the Apostles relates the story of the development of the fledgling Church. It logically flows that today's liturgy invites further reflection on the **CHURCH**. Thus, today the doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal issue of **CHURCH** and its **STRUCTURE**.

REVELATION Part I or II

What better time is there than Easter season to focus our attention on God's revelation to humanity? The second reading particularly focuses on God's revelation. Today's session will focus on God's revelation.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Easter is to the year what Sunday is to the week. Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.